



# TRACY KIDDER Writes

## *“to Catch the Reflection of a Human Being on the Page”*

Mention nonfiction author Tracy Kidder and a variety of books spring to readers' minds, perhaps not surprising given a 30-year writing career that has included books on a wide range of subjects—from computers to nursing homes to Haiti, and more.

Some remember Kidder best for his 1981 Pulitzer Prize-winning and National Book Award-winning *The Soul of a New Machine*; others associate him with *House* or *Among Schoolchildren*, an account of a year in the life of a fifth-grade teacher, which won the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award in 1999. Additional titles include 1994's *Old Friends* and 1999's *Home Town*.

These days, Kidder, 64, is drawing a new audience of college students—thanks to his 2003 bestseller, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*. The book has been named to reading lists for incoming students at about 100 colleges due to its inspiring message.

Kidder's latest book, *Strength in What Remains* (August 2009), shares themes and connections with *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. The new book tells the story of a Burundian immigrant and genocide survivor, Deo, who returned to his war-torn, impoverished country to open a public health clinic. (Deo's clinic is affiliated with Paul Farmer's Partners in Health organization.)

“It's the most event-driven book I've written, and it's the most like a page-turner,” says Kidder. The book's title comes from a poem by William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” and its larger theme, says Kidder, is memory—how a person copes with “the torment of memory, with memories that have an ungovernable quality to them. The solution for this person is rather wonderful and inspiring.”

Kidder's last two books tell tales of good versus evil on an epic scope, showing heroic individuals fighting for humanity. Farmer's cause, Kidder says, has inspired him; the book touched him more deeply than his others, and he continues to promote Partners in Health.

Nonetheless, Kidder says he doesn't plan to necessarily write his next book with a similar theme.

“I don't know what I'm going to do yet,” he says. “I've never wanted what most newspaper reporters would call a beat; I've never wanted to be a specialist in one thing. Every three or four years, I get to change the subject entirely, without changing jobs. I get paid to satisfy my idle curiosity.”

“It's really kind of wonderful.”

Kidder was born in New York in 1945. He graduated from Harvard University, then served a tour of duty in Vietnam. He earned his MFA from the University of Iowa, where he met Dan Wakefield, a contributing editor at *Atlantic Monthly*, who opened the doors for Kidder at the publication.

In a memoir about his service in Vietnam, *My Detachment* (2005), Kidder recalls writing fiction while at Harvard and studying under poet Robert Fitzgerald—an influential teacher who led Kidder to think of himself as a writer.

Yet Kidder, despite publishing three short stories, says he doesn't plan to write a novel—at least not yet. “It's something I've told myself for years I'd go back to,” he says. “But wanting to write a novel is a much less useful desire than having a novel you really want to write, and I don't happen to have one of those right at the moment.”

Kidder works from a basement office in his house in Massachusetts—a “big old rambling” former creamery—or

from his summer place in Maine. “It doesn’t really matter to me as long as it’s a room with a door, where I feel really private. What I’ve learned over the years to do is try to cultivate a lack of self-consciousness while I’m at work. This leaves you, in a funny way, undefended.”

Rewriting is Kidder’s favorite part of writing, rough drafts his most despised.

“I hate writing rough drafts of almost anything,” he says, explaining that they make him feel like he is “just lost in chaos—but as the draft goes on, I feel I’m discovering what it was I saw; I’m distilling things, I’m pulling order out of chaos.”

While it’s a struggle to spend even four hours at a sitting doing a rough draft, says Kidder, when rewriting he can spend “huge amounts of time. I love it. I can remember times I’d sleep a few hours and wake up [at 3:30 a.m.] and my book was vibrating in my head; knowing I was unable to go back to sleep, I’d just get up and go to work.”

He makes his nonfiction come alive, he says, by using the “tools of storytelling” and finding “literagenic” subjects who move on the page.

“The only thing I deny myself is outright invention: that is, making up characters and dialogue, making up incidents that never happened,” he says. “Otherwise, I feel as though it’s all fair game for writing nonfiction of the kind I’m interested in in writing. . . . To me, the main engine of story is human character, and the essential question is why do people do what they do?”

“To try to catch the reflection of the human being on the page seems to me to be the most important thing a writer of narrative does.”

To help portray his subjects, Kidder spends time getting to know them, taking notes about “what things look like, how they smell, the tactile, concrete impressions, what people say, what I hear.”

Once done with his draft, he turns it over to his trusted editor, Richard Todd, a former editor at the *Atlantic Monthly* who has been helping him polish his work since the early 1970s. “He taught me how to write to the extent I know how.”

Kidder says every writer needs “another set of eyes”—an editor who can fairly evaluate his or her work, and who “doesn’t seem to be insinuating that you’re a lousy writer,

but that there’s something wrong in this thing you’ve written.”

He recommends aspiring writers “read and write—there is no substitute for those; both are absolutely crucial.” Additionally, Kidder says writers should “have some experience in the world.” He is leery of young people writing memoirs: “People ought to have to get licenses in order to write them, and one of the criteria for getting a license is that you’d have to have done something in your life besides grow up in a dysfunctional family.”

Kidder believes “almost anyone can learn how to write clearly and well. I think that’s of use to everyone: it’s another way of thinking . . . it’s the only way I know of for thinking, anyhow.”

He recommends writing teachers be gentle, but honest, with students. “You have to remember that the first attempts at writing something are tender shoots; there is no sense in being nasty. But it’s a delicate balance: you really have to be honest with people about their writing.”

“It seems to me you get to know your class—any good teacher does—and you get to know who can take it and who can’t. I think there are ways that you can inspire students. I remember the way Robert Fitzgerald did it. He would read to us, he would talk to us, he had us write in class.”

Because of his frequent trips to colleges for *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Kidder has discovered a new set of college-age fans.

“I really like these common readings. . . . I’ve enjoyed the time I’ve spent. I know my book did inspire some students. There’s a young guy at Stanford who started a flourishing student organization, Faith Aids, that has raised over a million dollars for Partners in Health.”

Kidder thinks many students “are weary of America’s vast materialism. They are hungry for stories that show it’s possible to construct a meaningful life, with larger purposes than making money and spending it.”

And he is happy he has been able to provide them with such stories.

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